

PERFECT UNITY

A Guide for
Christian Doctrine and Life

RALPH CUNNINGTON



P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

I love Ralph's new book, period. Let's start right there. It is now my favorite introduction to the God of the Bible, overview of the unfolding story the Bible tells, and exploration of the riches and implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is accessible, timely, and intelligent. It is rooted in historical orthodoxy and is as current as the challenges of our day. And somehow, Ralph was able to pull all that off in just over two hundred pages.

Even if I didn't share a treasured friendship with Ralph and had simply discovered his new book online or in a friend's home, the title *Perfect Unity* would have instantly piqued my interest. In an age of divisiveness, enmity, and strife, even semi-healthy expressions of unity are desperately needed. And though the concept of "perfect unity" seems implausible, as a Christian I am wired for hope. So the title rocks.

But the subtitle is just as compelling to me personally—maybe even more so. As someone who has been directionally impaired all my life, the word *guide* brings me comfort—especially when it's connected to matters of faith and life. I discovered a long time ago that there's nothing *more than* the gospel, just *more of* the gospel. So I'm always ready to be guided into a greater understanding and experience of "the faith delivered once for all to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

But as awesome as the title of Ralph's book may be, the title is #5 on a top five list of reasons I am excited and grateful for this new book.

Before I ever turned one page of Ralph's manuscript, I experienced the reality that generated the sentences, paragraphs, and chapters of this wonderful book. Indeed, I saw, smelled, and tasted this book before I read it. I witnessed organic reality before I interacted with my friend's thoughts on

paper. It's impossible for me to overstate how important of a gift this is to me. I have had the privilege of both visiting and ministering in City Church Manchester, where Ralph serves as lead pastor.

Nothing narrated in these pages is abstract theory but is rather gospel reality in the making. It's a lot easier to write an aspirational book about unity than chronicle God's work in creating palpable unity in your own highly diverse church family. Ralph has a well-trained mind, but he also has a grace-trained palate—savoring the present reality of God's kingdom, while he hungers for the fullness of the kingdom. It shows up in his pastoring and his writing.

Indeed, I thank God for City Church—a community that demonstrates that unity isn't uniformity, a big group hug, and the absence of conflict. Unity is the blending, not homogenizing, of the grand diversity we enjoy as image bearers of God. Ralph's book shows us that this unity is grounded in the greatness, oneness, and diversity of God himself—as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and is brought to life by the person and work of Jesus and the present ministry of the Holy Spirit.

As I read *Perfect Unity*, it increasingly felt as though I were enjoying a musical score. This book sings as much as it informs. It doesn't just present the truth but also opens the curtains on the goodness and beauty of our God and his glorious gospel. Thank you, Ralph. Thank you, my dear friend, brother, and colleague in gospel wonder. Your church family, heart, book, and title all rock.

Scotty Smith
Franklin, Tennessee

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It has been said that “it takes a village to raise a child,” and it certainly takes a church to raise a Christian author. I would therefore like to thank various people who have shaped me and, in so doing, shaped this book. First, I thank my academic mentor, Dr. Bob Letham, without whom this book would never have been written. I am so grateful for your input at various stages of the project. My spiritual mentor, Scotty Smith, has been a constant presence. My heart is daily warmed by your gospel nuggets, and you have cheered me on throughout the writing of this book. Thank you.

Thanks also to Tessa Reed, Helen Hughes, Brandon O’Brien, Matt Walldock, and Emma Cunnington, who read earlier drafts of the book and gave invaluable feedback. Thank you for your keen eye and for improving the book in so many ways. Tessa also provided the questions at the end of each chapter, which I trust will help readers to dig deeper and apply what they have read to their own lives.

I am immensely blessed to be a pastor and a member of City Church Manchester. We are only nine years old as a church, but God has done so many wonderful things in and through us. I love our diversity (over forty nations) and our unity (we only split in order to plant churches), and I’m deeply aware that these are gifts from God. Thank you to my fellow elders, Matt, Josh, Eric, Boaz, and Sam, who covered for me while I wrote this book on sabbatical.

Thank you to P&R Publishing, and especially to Amanda Martin, Joy Woo, David Acevedo, John Hughes, and Dave Almack, who shaped and guided this book on its road to completion. All errors remain my own.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family. Sophie, Zach, and Jacob, you bring fun, laughter, and joy into my life. I love the way you are so different

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and yet such great friends. And Anna, my distinct but inseparable companion: thank you for your love, support, and kindness. It is always more than I deserve. Thank you for reminding me daily of the gospel of grace through your grace-driven love for me.

Soli Deo gloria in this book and in his one church—distinct but inseparable.

INTRODUCTION

John Lennon urged us to “imagine”: imagine a world where there are no countries, where we all live in peace, where we all live as *one*. I find that vision pretty appealing. I love the idea of the world, in all its beautiful diversity, being united—each part playing its role, retaining its unique features while contributing to the one, unified whole.

But as I look around, I see a world rife with division. There is conflict between countries and conflict within countries. Despots order their armies to commit atrocious acts in order to realign ancient boundaries. Neighbors and family members turn against one another as they align themselves with different group identities that are defined by what they oppose. It is ugly, and it is sad. We yearn for the sort of “oneness” that Lennon describes, but it seems tantalizingly elusive. Is there any hope?

Lennon’s answer, in his song “Imagine,” is an atheistic utopia that channels Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto*: a place where there is no heaven, hell, or religion. For many people, this may sound persuasive. After all, religion has been at the root of many of the world’s worst conflicts. Whether it be the hostility between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, the tragic complicity of the Protestant church in the African slave trade, or the marginalization of same-sex-attracted people by the church, the role of religion in dividing us is undeniable.

It is misguided, however, to assume that the solution to division on earth is simply to remove religion and replace it with a form of philosophical naturalism. Indeed, the nihilism that Lennon proposes fails both to accurately diagnose the problem and to offer a viable solution.

Let's start with the problem, which we can observe on both an individual and a societal level.

As individuals, we encounter a curious paradox: we fear difference, and yet we are strangely drawn to it. I see that in my marriage. Anna and I are a prime example of the saying "opposites attract." Our personalities, interests, love languages, and approaches to conflict are all at opposite ends of the spectrum, and that is one of the things that so attracts us to one another. Yet, at times, it is also a source of fear because differences expose.

Engaging with someone who is different from you shines a light on your personality, assumptions, culture, and desires. Because it can be profoundly unsettling, it often makes us yearn for an echo chamber—for people who are just like us. We also see these impulses in relations between people of different ethnicities. Initially, we may find it intriguing to learn about other people's languages, customs, histories, and cuisines. But before long, we become uncomfortable as our assumptions are challenged and the views we hold strongly are exposed as culturally formed preferences.

We see the same dynamic at work in society. In the 1970s, multiculturalism was a settled government policy in the United Kingdom. It was seen as the best way to accommodate the significant increase in postwar immigration. The government assumed that communities would be able to live side by side without adapting any of their cultures, languages, or customs. More recently, however, this approach has been called into question. The inability of communities to peacefully coexist, along with real concerns about what some groups believe, has resulted in greater opposition to multiculturalism. The former head of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, stated that "multiculturalism suggests separateness" and that the UK needs a more unifying and homogeneous culture with "common values . . . the common currency of the English language, honouring the culture of these islands, like Shakespeare and Dickens."¹

This is a controversial topic—and multiculturalism is a notoriously difficult concept to define—but it highlights the uncomfortable truth that diversity is both attractive and repellant, beautiful and unsettling.

1. Anushka Asthana and Gaby Hinsliff, "Equality Chief Branded as 'Right Wing,'" *The Guardian*, April 3, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/apr/04/race.britishidentity>.

Why is that so?

John Lennon's musings in "Imagine" fail to make sense of the problem. His naturalistic account of the world, in which we are nothing more than impersonal atoms flying around and bumping into one another, does not explain why we value diversity and find it so attractive. His insistence that the problem lies with established religion overlooks its true source: our own hearts. This, of course, means that the concepts of heaven and hell cannot be so easily discarded.

What is the solution? For a time, society (under the influence of modernism) sought to pursue unity by denying difference. Abraham Kuyper memorably described this as "a reckless levelling and the elimination of all diversity," which "seeks a false, deceptive unity, the uniformity of death."² Kuyper traced this tendency from the Roman Empire to the French Revolution: "Blind to the rich profusion of the different shades of life, it crushes everything fresh and natural by its thirst for the conventional."³ He saw it in his own day through the erosion of ethnic, cultural, and sexual distinctions. His work was remarkably prophetic and anticipated the late twentieth century, in which claims to be "gender blind" and "color blind" were lauded rather than condemned.

Things have changed since then. Today, society (under the influence of postmodernism) has chosen to emphasize difference rather than deny it. One manifestation of this has been the emergence of identity politics, which establishes alternating power structures in which one group oppresses the other and then is oppressed by it in turn. The background to this conceptualization of society has been historic and documented injustice (both individual and structural) that requires redress.

To this extent, the motivation of many who swim in the waters of identity politics is both good and biblical. Scripture is clear that the Lord cares for the marginalized and the oppressed (see Isa. 25:4; 61:1–3; Mal. 3:5) and that Christians should too (see Isa. 1:17; Zech. 7:9–10). The problem is that identity politics not only seeks to right historic wrongs but also creates distance between people groups and pits them against one another: men against women, Whites against Blacks, transgender people against feminists. Consistent with

2. Abraham Kuyper, "Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 23.

3. Kuyper, 25.

its postmodern underpinnings, identity politics is excellent at celebrating and even intensifying diversity, but it has no framework for establishing unity.

In short, the modern approach denies the glory of diversity, while the postmodern approach denies the possibility of unity. We instinctively long for something better: true unity amid true diversity. Yet this always seems out of reach. Is there any hope? In his classic work *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis famously wrote,

The Christian says, Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.⁴

What if our desire for unity in diversity points beyond our observable experience to a reality that is found within God himself? And what if this reality could become ours by being caught up into the beautiful story that Christians call the gospel?

The seed of this book was planted more than a decade ago. I remember it well. Our second child, Zach, had just been born and was keeping my wife and me up at night. It was my first year at the Wales Evangelical School of Theology (now Union School of Theology), and, determined not to miss any lectures, I made my way to my 9 a.m. systematic theology class. As I took my seat, Dr. Robert Letham announced, “These three words will stand you in good stead as you continue theological study and enter into pastoral ministry. They will guard you against theological heterodoxy.”

He had our attention! We sat on the edge of our seats, waiting for this piece of theological gold dust that would both guarantee our course grade and give us a solid foundation for pastoral ministry.

4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: William Collins, 2016), 136–37.

Looking at us intently, Dr. Letham spoke the three words: “Distinct but inseparable.”

It’s fair to say that the class was underwhelmed. We had expected something far more profound, more radical, but as the years have gone by, I’ve become convinced that Dr. Letham was absolutely right.

I quickly realized that the phrase was not original to him. It was first formulated by fourth-century theologian Augustine as he sought to articulate an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. It was picked up again in the fifth century by the Council of Chalcedon as it sought to explain the relationship between Christ’s human nature and his divine nature. A question began to form in my mind: Was it a mere coincidence that the phrase used to describe the nature of God as Trinity was also used to describe the union of natures that lies at the heart of the incarnation? I quickly realized that it wasn’t.

Humanity was created in the image of God (see Gen. 1:26). As we shall see, this is an intensely relational concept with implications both for our vertical relationship with God and for our horizontal relationships with one another. Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck wrote, “The Trinity reveals God to us as the fullness of being, the true life, eternal beauty. In God . . . there is unity in diversity, and diversity in unity.”⁵

“Unity in diversity, and diversity in unity” is the template for all other relationships in the universe. Contrary to our instincts, unity is founded not on homogeneity—parties being identical—but rather on a union of diverse parties. Human sin has corrupted the unity in diversity that should be present throughout God’s creation, and the good news of the gospel is that God has restored this unity in diversity. Accordingly, the phrase “distinct but inseparable” has a crucial role to play in helping us understand who God is, who we are, how we have been redeemed, and where we are heading. That is the focus of this book.

In part 1, we will begin by exploring who God is. We will see that he is one God who has eternally existed in three distinct but inseparable persons. This is what Bavinck meant when he wrote that, in God, there is unity in diversity and diversity in unity. This provides the essential framework

5. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 331.

for rightly understanding the unity in diversity that we see in the world around us and the strong desire we have for relationships with people who are unlike us.

In part 2, we will see how the distinct yet inseparable relationship between God and humanity was ruined by the fall. This relationship was restored by God the Son as he assumed a human nature, distinct yet inseparable from his divine nature, which has enabled us to worship God again, distinct yet inseparable from him.

Part 3 looks at the big picture of what God is doing in the world. It walks through the various views of how God relates to the world he has made and shows that the Bible teaches both God's sovereignty and humanity's responsibility. The relationship between these two truths is notoriously tricky to articulate, but I will demonstrate how the language of "distinct but inseparable" provides the necessary framework for understanding God's sovereignty in the world. Moreover, I will show how this doctrine is derived from God's own being, which is both transcendent and immanent.

In part 4, we will consider Christian identity: Who are we as Christians? I will answer this question against the backdrop of current debates about identity. We will see that Christians have both an external, given identity (justification and adoption) and an internal, emerging identity (sanctification). These three gifts of salvation are received distinctly but inseparably through our union with Christ and are therefore both fixed and assured.

Part 5 explores how we grow in the Christian life. It focuses on the ancient yet often forgotten truth that the means of grace (the preaching of the Word and the sacraments) are the spiritual greenhouse of the Christian life. Christians sometimes wonder whether spiritual growth ought to be automatic whenever we use the means of grace. We will see that the phrase "distinct but inseparable" helps us to appreciate how the Holy Spirit uses the means of grace and encourages us to approach them confidently and expectantly.

In the final part of this book, we will seek to apply what we have learned to the church. These are tumultuous times in which the church is being rocked by debates surrounding gender, ethnicity, and identity politics. Many Christians struggle to provide a winsome and plausible response. We will see that the church has always had the conceptual framework to respond faithfully and persuasively to the current challenges—we have just forgotten about it! The

Introduction

distinction without separation that we see within the Godhead and within the gospel is essential to understanding the church. We are one church of many gifts, one church of two genders, and one church of all nations.

I am passionate about this book because I believe its central message is of profound importance to the church today. I ought to acknowledge, though, that it discusses extremely sensitive topics, topics that will touch each of us in different ways. I serve on a church staff where both of my copastors experienced racist bullying at school and where my American colleague lived under the oppression of racial segregation in the United States for many years. My stepmother grew up in an internment camp set up by British colonial authorities to put down the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. Though I have not experienced ethnic or sexual discrimination firsthand, I care deeply about it.

The wonderful message of this book is that one day all discrimination will end. As we await that day, we are called to glorify God as his unified, diverse church.

Part 1

Who Is God?

I still remember the first time I asked a Christian to explain the doctrine of the Trinity. I wasn't yet a believer, but I was genuinely interested in learning more. The poor girl looked at me as if I'd asked her how many angels can dance on a pinhead! She replied, somewhat apologetically, "I don't really know. It's one of the mysteries of the Christian faith!" That didn't sound satisfactory to me. If the God who Christians worship is triune, then, surely, there should be something more to say about him than "It's just one big mystery, like in Scooby-Doo!"

During membership classes at City Church, I often ask questions about the theological truths we profess. One of the questions I like to ask is "Why is the doctrine of the Trinity important?" I hear lots of great answers: the doctrine enables God to be love within himself, it shows how he is relational in his very essence, it provides the basis for unity in diversity within the world he has created. All of those things are wonderfully true, and we will discuss them later, but they are consequences of the doctrine of the Trinity, not the doctrine itself. The reason why the doctrine of the Trinity is important—the fundamental reason—is that it describes who God is.

But how much can we know about God? Is it reasonable to think that we can explain the Trinity? Surely the girl was right to say that the nature of God is a mystery. He is infinite, after all, and we are finite. Isn't it ridiculous to imagine that we can understand him?

Now is the time to consider two words that describe the different degrees to which we know things. The first word is “comprehension.” To comprehend something is to know absolutely everything there is to know about it. In truth, human beings do not comprehend *anything*.

The second way in which we know things is through “apprehension.” We apprehend something when we know true things about it without knowing it exhaustively. I spent seven years teaching commercial law at university. During that time, I apprehended commercial law—that is to say, I knew lots of true things about the subject without knowing it exhaustively. Did my lack of exhaustive knowledge exclude me from teaching? Of course not!

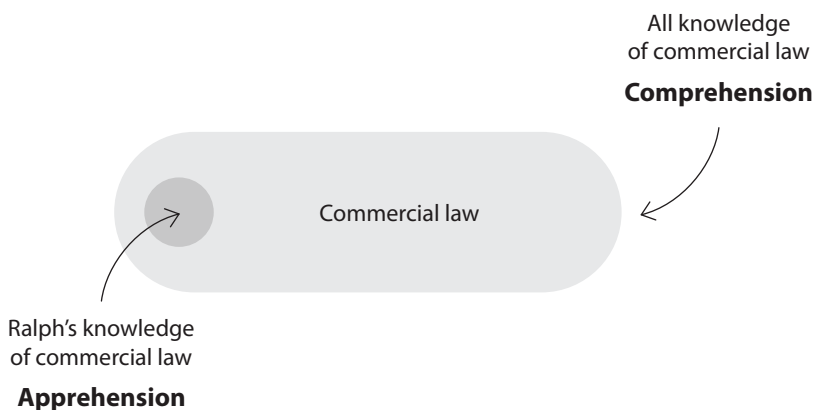


Fig. 1.1. Degrees of Knowing

Some argue that we cannot *truly* know God because we cannot know him exhaustively. But that is flawed logic. There are lots of things about which we have real, true knowledge but not exhaustive knowledge. In fact, that is the way we relate to the vast majority of things in our world, including our job, our parents, our spouse, and our children. We know them and want to know them better, even though we cannot know them exhaustively.

With this in mind—and acknowledging that we cannot know everything there is to know about the Trinity—we will examine what we do know about the Trinity in chapter 1.

1

ONE GOD IN THREE PERSONS

The God of the Bible is one God who has eternally existed as three persons. Ultimate beauty is found in the God who is three in one.

The Bible's teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity can be summarized by three key statements:

1. God is one.
2. God has eternally existed in three persons.
3. Each person of the Trinity is fully God.

God Is One

The Bible repeatedly declares that there is one true God. Deuteronomy 6:4 reads, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." The Israelites are then told to impress the commandments of this one true God on their children, talking about them when they sit at home and when they walk along the road, when they go to bed and when they rise (see Deut. 6:7).

This affirmation of faith in the one true God is repeated throughout the Old Testament. In Isaiah 44:6–7, we read, "This is what the LORD says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it."

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul writes, “There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

At first glance, these repeated claims that “the LORD is God and there is no other” may sound horribly exclusive. Contemporary Western society claims to be pluralistic: Hindus have their gods, Muslims have Allah, Jews have Yahweh, Sikhs have Waheguru. Many believe that this acceptance of any and all gods furthers the much-promoted goals of tolerance and inclusivity in our society.

However, we must understand that the multiplicity of gods is what divided the peoples of the ancient Near East. The Moabites worshipped Chemosh, the Ammonites worshipped Milcom, and the Edomites worshipped Qaus. These were territorial gods who, their followers claimed, provided protection in return for sacrifices. The gods were tied to particular people in particular places. They were exclusive.

The God of the Bible is inclusive. Because he is the one true God, he is everyone’s God—without exception or qualification. After writing that “there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus,” Paul writes that Jesus “gave himself as a ransom for *all* people” (1 Tim. 2:5, 6). Because God is one, his Savior is a savior for *all* who believe (see Rom. 1:16)—without exception. This is radical inclusivism.

God Has Eternally Existed as Three Persons

Some assume that the doctrine of the Trinity is taught only in the New Testament or, even worse, that it was invented by the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century AD (this was the famous claim of Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*). That would be shocking if God has indeed eternally existed as Trinity. However, when you dig into the Old Testament, you quickly discover abundant evidence of plurality within God.

We can start in the very first chapter of the Bible. Genesis 1:26 reads, “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.’” Notice that the verse includes a plural verb (“let us”) and a plural pronoun (“our”).

What is the significance of this? It’s possible that God is using the “royal we,” much as the King of England might say, “We are not impressed by your poor taste in music!” The problem is that there are no other examples of the

“royal we” in Hebrew literature. Alternatively, God may be speaking with other beings, such as the angels, as he creates, but that would make these other beings cocreators with God—there is no evidence for this elsewhere in the Bible. The third and most plausible option is that this is the earliest evidence of plurality within God.

We see something similar in Isaiah 6. The prophet Isaiah sees the Lord seated on a throne in the temple. Angels are all around him, and we read in verse 8, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’” Note that God uses both singular and plural pronouns here: “Whom shall *I* send?” and “Who will go for *us*?” This is significant evidence of both unity and plurality within God himself.¹

There are many more Old Testament passages we could examine, but Psalm 110 is probably the best known, not least because Jesus quotes it in Mark 12:36–37. In verse 1 of the psalm, David writes, “The LORD says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”

The question is, Who is David referring to when he speaks of two lords? It seems clear that the first lord is Yahweh—that’s why our English translations capitalize the word *LORD*. But who is the second lord? David is writing as the king of Israel, and he has no lord other than God. Yet the second lord is clearly distinct from Yahweh and is given a place at Yahweh’s right hand, which is suitable only for one who is himself God. Here again is evidence of plurality in God—one who is a son of David yet the Lord of David, as Jesus notes in Mark 12:37.

While God’s eternal existence as three persons is visible in the Old Testament, it comes to the fore in the New. At Jesus’s baptism, we see God the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove while the voice of God the Father declares from heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). All three persons of the Trinity are active.

Some of the most well-known verses in the Bible contain a triadic formula whereby the names of all three persons of the Trinity are invoked. Perhaps the most famous is the Great Commission, in which Jesus commands his

1. In Acts 28:25, the apostle Paul connects this verse to the Holy Spirit. John Calvin writes, “God talks with himself in the plural. And here unquestionably he holds a consultation with his eternal Wisdom and his eternal Power—that is with the Son and the Holy Spirit.” *Isaiah* (Wheaton, IL: 2000), 64.

disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19).

Almost equally well known, and probably repeated more often in church life, is “the grace,” or benediction, found at the end of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14). Each of these verses invokes the names of all three persons of the Trinity.

Each Person of the Trinity Is Fully God

The third truth that the Bible teaches is that each person of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is fully God. This was challenged in the third and fourth centuries by a theologian named Arius, who argued that the Son had a beginning and, therefore, that there was a time when he did not exist. As such, he saw the Son as the highest of all created beings (an angel) but not God himself. The church condemned this view as inconsistent with Scripture and with what the church had taught from its earliest days.

Let’s look briefly at the New Testament evidence. Throughout his gospel, Mark records Jesus doing numerous things that only God can do: on his own authority Jesus cast out demons (1:25–26; 3:23–29), forgave sins (2:1–12), calmed a storm (4:35–41), and raised a young girl from the dead (5:21–43). The teachers of the law clearly understood the implication of his actions, asking, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). The crowning moment of Mark’s gospel comes in 15:39, when a battle-hardened Roman centurion declares, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

Likewise, John’s gospel is full of claims that Jesus is God, both from Jesus himself and from others. The book opens with the declaration “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Later, in verse 14, the Word is identified as the one who became flesh: Jesus.

Now, Jehovah’s Witnesses (modern-day Arians who deny that Jesus is God) point out that the definite article (“the”) is missing at the end of John 1:1, so they translate the verse “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god” (New World Translation).

This is a mistake. It is not uncommon for the definite article to be omitted in New Testament Greek, and the reason for doing so here is quite clear. John has just described how the Word was with God (the Father) in the beginning—he thus emphasizes their distinction and their relationship. In the third part of the sentence, he wants to show that the Word is divine but not identical with the Father, and so he drops the definite article. He is saying, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with [the] God the Father, and the Word was God.” In so doing, he shows that the Word is distinct from the Father and yet equally God.

There are numerous confirmations of Jesus’s deity throughout John’s gospel. For example, there are seven “I am” statements: Jesus says, “I am the bread of life” (6:35), “I am the light of the world” (8:12), “I am the gate” (10:7), “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “I am the way and the truth and the life” (14:6), and “I am the true vine” (15:1). These were incredibly provocative sayings because, in Exodus 3:14, God identified himself to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM.” From that point on, this phrase became a way to relate with God personally and to say that God is the same today, yesterday, and forever. By using the phrase so often, Jesus unequivocally identified himself as God. His Jewish listeners certainly understood it that way, as it led them to pick up stones in order to stone him (see John 8:59).

In John’s gospel, Jesus is charged with “making himself equal with God” (5:18) and claiming to be God (see 10:33). In his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus declares, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (17:5). The climax of John’s gospel comes when Jesus invites Thomas to touch his hands and his side, after which Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28).

In addition to the evidence for the Son’s deity in the gospel accounts, there are numerous texts that affirm his deity elsewhere in the New Testament. In Romans 9:5, the apostle Paul expressly identifies Jesus as “God over all, forever praised!” and in Titus 2:13, he describes Jesus as “our great God and Savior.” The author of Hebrews identifies Jesus as God when he applies Psalm 45:6 to him: “Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever” (Heb. 1:8), and Peter does something similar when he applies Isaiah 8:12–13 to Jesus in 1 Peter 3:14–15.

The deity of the Holy Spirit is assumed throughout the Bible but made explicit in a number of places. The triadic formulas that we have examined place the Son and the Holy Spirit alongside God the Father. It would be absurd to baptize people in the name of the Son and the Spirit if the Son and the Spirit were somehow of a lower order than God the Father. People would simply be baptized in the name of the Father, as he alone would be God.

Perhaps the most significant passage for establishing the full deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit is Acts 5:1–11. It is a sad and sordid tale. Having seen believers in Jerusalem sell their property and give the proceeds to the poor, Ananias and Sapphira feel (presumably out of a desire to keep up with the Joneses) that they ought to do the same. But their hearts aren't really in it. They want to be seen as generous, but they're not willing to give away everything they receive. So they sell a piece of property but hold back some of the money, giving the rest to the apostles while claiming that they gave it all (see Acts 5:2). The apostle Peter's response is significant: "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?" (5:3).

Peter continues, "What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God" (5:4). Do you see what Peter has done? He has explicitly identified the Holy Spirit as God. As nineteenth-century American theologian W. G. T. Shedd put it, "The whole undivided divine nature is in each divine person simultaneously and eternally."²

Living It Out: We Worship God as Three in One

Understanding that God is Trinity shapes the way we worship him. No one has put this better than Gregory of Nazianzus, who wrote, "No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendour of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one."³ As we worship, we should honor God in his triunity—as both the one and the three. Our reflection on the three should move us to the one and then back

2. W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1979), 1:278.

3. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, Oration 40.41. Quoted in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 418.

to the three and then back to the one. This means that it is right and proper to worship each person of the Trinity as well as the whole Trinity.

Some resist this idea and suggest that the Holy Spirit is the “shy member” of the Trinity, who always deflects attention away from himself. It is true that the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus (see John 16:14) and that the ordinary pattern of prayer in Scripture is to pray to the Father, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit (see Eph. 2:18). Nevertheless, the Spirit remains fully God and worthy of our praise and worship. As John Owen writes, “The Holy Spirit is an eternally existing divine substance, the author of divine operation and the object of divine and religious worship.”⁴ We worship God as three in one. The most beautiful and supreme Being is one and many—unity in diversity.

Making It Personal

1. How could a deeper understanding of God as Trinity impact who you share the gospel with and how you share the gospel?
2. How should God’s eternal existence as three persons affect the way that you pray?
3. Which person of the Trinity do you cry out to most readily, and why? How could a deeper exploration of this question affect your intimacy with God?
4. Take time to pray to the triune God.

4. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 2, *Communion with God* (London: Banner of Truth, 1966), 400.